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Yugoslavia: Military Dynamics of a Potential Civil War

Summary

Yugoslavia appears headed toward dissolution, a process that will spark at least some violence. The scale of conflict is unpredictable at this point: unrest most probably will be localized in several republics at first, but violence could quickly spread. Although civil war is not a foregone conclusion, it remains a distinct possibility given recent explicit threats of violence by both federal and republic authorities.

We believe neither side could quickly win a civil war, and such a war would be bloody, disjointed, and protracted. Lightly armed republic forces could not defeat the more heavily armed, mobile national Army, but the federal forces could not pacify the republics in a guerrilla war, and their combat capabilities would decline over time. In addition, the Army itself is likely to fracture along ethnic lines in the face of serious violence.

A sizable conflict will likely have effects beyond Yugoslav borders and become a "European" problem. Refugee flows probably would be substantial, and emigre groups could become active in supporting cross-border violence. Because neither federal nor republic forces are likely to prevail on the field, both will look beyond Yugoslavia for support and assistance. An outside political solution to a violent breakup probably would be necessary, either through CSCE or other forums.

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Introduction

Yugoslavia's political fabric is badly frayed and will probably unravel in 1991. This process will likely be accompanied by some level of violence, particularly if, as we expect, federal leaders insist on maintaining central authority and final say on key policy questions.* In public and private statements, some senior military officers have already advocated force to reverse the republics' steady usurpation of federal powers, particularly over defense matters. Political flexibility has not wholly disappeared, however, and civil war is not inescapable. [REDACTED] the fear of a widespread, brutal conflict may brake political passions. Nevertheless, full-scale war is a distinct possibility and several recent developments--including the December 1990 electoral victory of Serbian Communists, Slovene political brinksmanship vis-a-vis the army and federal authorities, the growing possibility of Albanian unrest in Kosovo, and armed violence in Serb-dominated regions of Croatia--highlight the centrifugal forces at work in Yugoslavia. [REDACTED]

Yugoslav Military Forces

We believe the dual nature of Yugoslavia's military structure, with its federally based army, navy, and air force and regionally organized militia forces, has unintentionally laid the groundwork for civil war in the current crisis. For more than 20 years Belgrade has based its military policy on the doctrine of "All People's Defense"--a short conventional defense against an invading force followed by a protracted guerrilla war. The regular Army, a federal force under the command of a Serb-dominated officer corps, traditionally has had the mission of conducting initial armored and air operations against an invader. The more numerous, but lightly armed Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), under republic command, have been organized, equipped, and trained for guerrilla warfare. The keys to Belgrade's strategy--universal military training, mass mobilization, redundant command and control structures, widely distributed weaponry, and an operational approach reminiscent of Tito's concept for partisan warfare--equipped the entire society for war and has created two potential contenders. [REDACTED]

* This paper does not address the circumstances that could trigger violence. Rather, it examines the military dynamics at play in Yugoslavia and speculates on the nature and potential outcome of hostilities. Possible sources of conflict are described in several recent publications. See *Yugoslavia: Prospects for Military Intervention Growing* [REDACTED] 23 August 1990; *Yugoslavia: End of a Nation-Building Experiment* [REDACTED] 21 September 1990; and *Croatia: Drive for Autonomy Increasing Tension in Yugoslavia* [REDACTED] 24 September 1990. The reader should see National Intelligence Estimate NIE 15-90, *Yugoslavia Transformed*, October 1990, for a more detailed discussion of political developments. [REDACTED]

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Historically, both the national forces and the republic-based Territorial Defense Forces have been subordinate to national authority as components of the Yugoslav People's Army, or JNA after its Serbo-Croatian acronym. In reality, however, [REDACTED] the degree of Belgrade's political and military control over the territorial forces now ranges from little to none, depending on the region of the country. [REDACTED]

National Forces

The Yugoslav People's Army consists of separate ground, naval, air, and air defense forces. The ground force component, with 110,000 men, is a conventional armored force organized into a full range of combat arms and support services. It is equipped with a heterogeneous arms inventory, lacks modern weapons and support equipment, has limited logistic and communications capabilities, and has little, if any, offensive capability against its neighbors. It is, however, more heavily armed, more mobile, and better equipped and trained than the territorial forces. [REDACTED]

The national air and air defense forces have some 34,000 personnel and are equipped with almost 400 Soviet and domestically produced fighter, ground attack, and reconnaissance aircraft. The bulk of Yugoslavia's attack helicopters are also under air force control. The air force almost certainly is incapable of establishing air superiority against a determined attack from a NATO air force or the Soviet Union, but it has ground attack capabilities that could be employed in a civil war. [REDACTED]

Territorial Defense Forces

Despite Belgrade's efforts to disarm and degrade territorial forces, we believe these units continue to be a viable military force equipped with small arms, and light anti-armor and anti-air weapons. Republic-based TDF units primarily are small infantry units organized by municipalities and factories. Trained in hit-and-run warfare, TDF units would be a capable guerrilla force in urban settings or in Yugoslavia's rugged countryside. Although these units lack armor and air assets and have only limited mobility, the existence of the TDF is worrisome to senior JNA officers, who have come to regard them as rudimentary republic armies. JNA leaders moved last spring to disarm the TDF, seizing weapons stocks at the republic level. These seizures seriously depleted TDF arms stocks, although the degree varies in each republic. Since then, the independence-minded republics of Slovenia and Croatia have engaged in vigorous arms acquisition. [REDACTED]

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Disposition and Composition of Federal and Republic Forces

National Forces. The regular Army's striking power--tanks, combat vehicles, and artillery--is dispersed among 57 brigades and independent regiments deployed throughout the country. As political tensions have increased, these units have been ordered to maintain a high state of combat readiness. We believe commanders have made particular efforts in the Fifth Military Region encompassing Slovenia and most of Croatia (see map), because regular army officers have come to regard TDF forces there as republican armies threatening both national unity and the Army.

Two regular Army corps, comprising 19 armored, mechanized, and infantry brigades and four infantry regiments and support units are currently stationed in the Fifth Military Region. Croats and Slovenes comprise about one-third of the conscript force in the region. These forces are among the Army's most capable units, and they likely could seize key republic facilities, such as government buildings and communications facilities, within hours. Remaining Army units are dispersed throughout the republics, but federal authorities would prefer to rely on heavily armed police units under Interior Ministry control to maintain order in trouble spots like Kosovo province. These units are now bogged down in Kosovo, their capabilities undercut by Slovenia and Croatia's decision last year to withdraw their nationals from the force.

Territorial Forces. According to multiple sources, authorities in Slovenia and Croatia have bolstered their defenses in recent weeks, organizing new units and acquiring substantial numbers of weapons on the international arms market. Croatia's 200,000-member TDF forces were effectively disarmed by the May 1990 arms roundup. In response, authorities there are organizing and arming a new paramilitary force that will be some 40,000 strong.

Slovenia's 60,000-strong TDF units have retained half of their weapons and we believe authorities there have boosted the readiness of their forces. Additionally, special republic police and interior ministry units, armed with automatic weapons, are guarding government facilities.

Dynamics within the Military

We believe the regular Army retains the military capability to act against the republics, but political developments in recent months have undermined its effectiveness as an armed force. Yugoslavia's longstanding system of parallel command structures at the federal and republic level, with both the regular Army and TDF forces ultimately answering to the Federal civilian presidency, has collapsed. Rising



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ethnic friction, nationalism, and declining federal authority have affected the responsiveness and discipline of the troops and raised serious questions about how long the Army would remain intact in the event of a civil war. [REDACTED]

The Army is neither wholly unified nor are its troops unquestionably reliable. The senior officer corps is nominally balanced along ethnic lines, and these officers retain a pan-Yugoslav orientation. Serbs, however, have long dominated the middle and lower officer ranks, making line officers, at least, broadly sympathetic to the Communist government in Serbia. Although Serbs make up only 36 percent of the population, they and their close Montenegrin cousins comprise 60 percent of the officer corps. [REDACTED] nationalist fissures exist within mid-level and junior officer ranks between Serbs and other nationalities. At lower ranks, the bulk of the Army consists of some 80,000 conscripts whose ethnic makeup more closely reflects the composition of Yugoslav society. Their principal loyalties are likely to remain with their own ethnic group and native republic (see graphic). [REDACTED]

We believe the cohesion and discipline of enlisted men would be gravely tested by orders to fire on civilians or even on TDF units. Within the context of a limited military action we believe the troops would inflict and receive limited casualties without breaking. For example, if the army were used to seize Slovene draft records or as a show of force to end ethnic fighting and restore order in Bosnia and Hercegovina or Kosovo, the units likely would respond to authority and enforce the government's policy. Sustained or large-scale violence, as would likely occur in fighting against Slovene or Croatian forces, would, in our view, shatter the troops' discipline. [REDACTED]

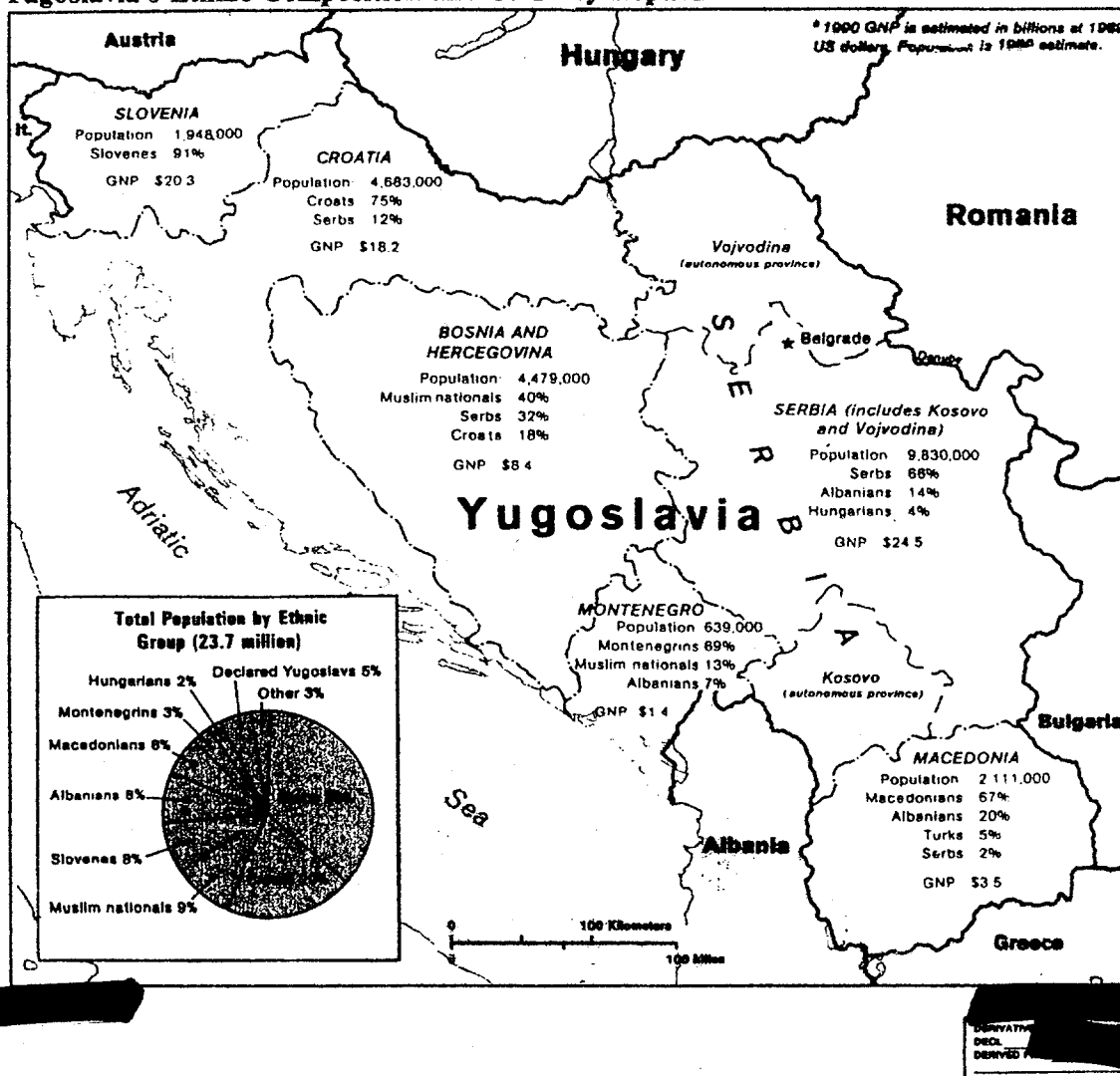
A conflict serious enough to fracture the Army would turn it essentially into a rump Serbian army. With the breakdown of unit cohesion and discipline that would likely accompany organized violence, the Army would probably fracture along ethnic lines, leading to wholesale desertions and intra-unit violence. Some troops probably would take their personal weapons and join the TDF or paramilitary forces in their home republics. We believe officers and troops sympathetic to Serbia--some 40-50 percent of the Army--would remain.* Serbian TDF might combine with the remnants of the regular Army, giving Serbia a sizable military force. [REDACTED]

Factionalization of the regular Army would, in our view, markedly decrease its military effectiveness. It probably would retain control over most, but not all, of its heavy equipment. However, with ranks

* The Army, which could lose 50-60 percent of its active duty and ready reserve strength following factionalization of the force, might total some 150,000 in a civil war. We estimate the Serbian TDF to be some 300,000. Effective republican forces in Slovenia and Croatia might, we estimate, be in the 150,000-200,000 range, although Croatia's January call-up of 200,000 reservists could eventually expand this number. [REDACTED]

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Yugoslavia's Ethnic Composition and GNP* by Republic



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thinned by desertion, combat units, as well as combat support and service support, would all be ineffective until they were reformed. Logistic support and maintenance capabilities would probably decline, which would likely undercut air operations by either the regular Army or the air force. [REDACTED]

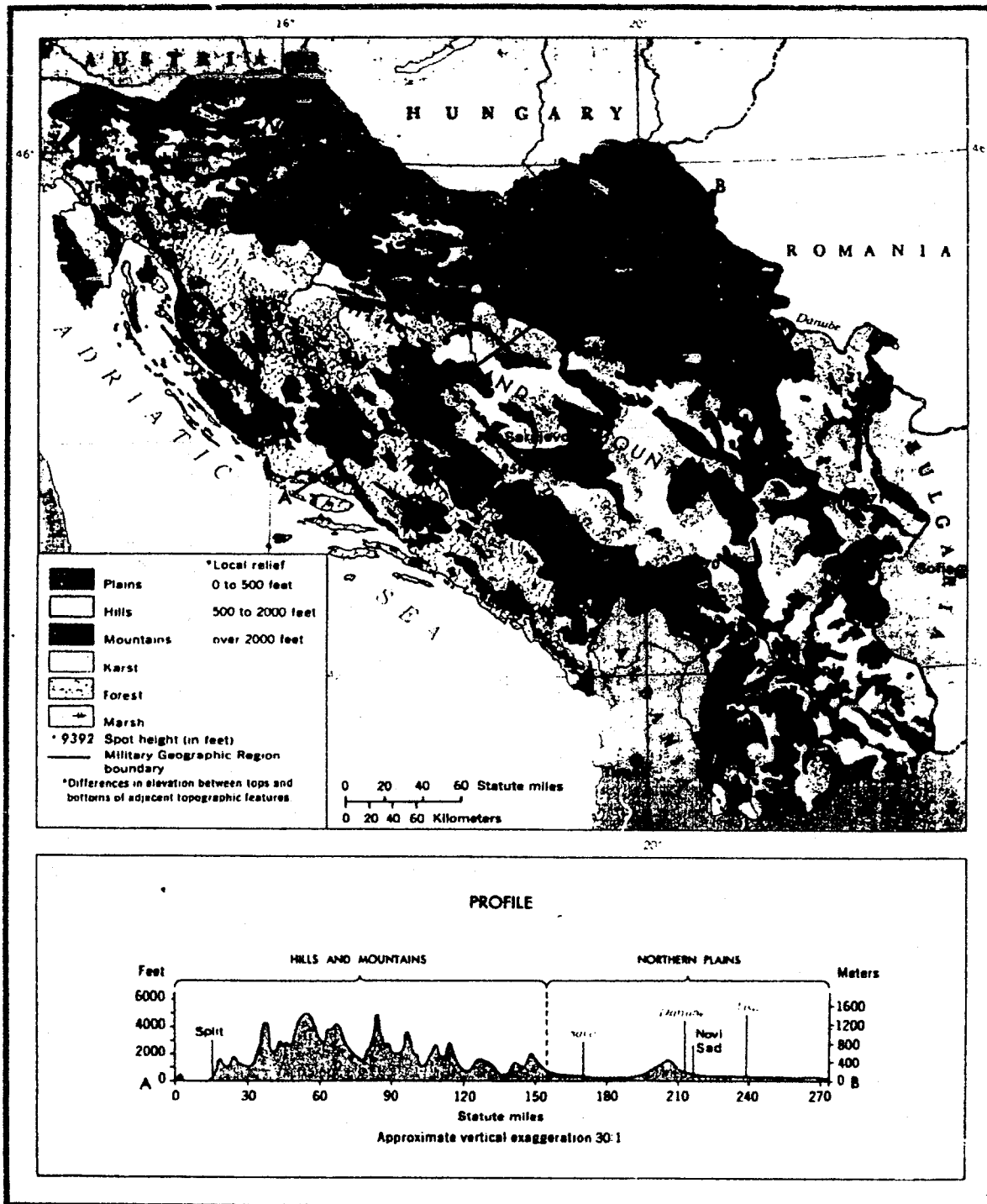
Military Stalemate Likely

Whether localized in one or two republics or nation-wide, civil war in Yugoslavia, in our view, would be bloody, disjointed, and protracted, with neither side able to impose its will by force of arms. Republican forces could not prevail in fixed, large-scale battles against much more mobile and better-equipped regular Army units, but the Army also could not completely pacify the republics in a guerrilla war. Whatever the dimensions of the conflict, the regular Army is likely to hold sway over those areas of the country in which its military strengths can be employed effectively. Control over the northern plains, containing the nation's principal cities, much of its industry, and the bulk of its rail lines, highways, and lines of communication, would almost certainly be a key Army objective, and would probably be within its grasp. We would expect the Army to make forays against, or be in uneasy control of, major cities, and to be hunting for republic units. Republic armies, drawing on popular support and active in the hills, mountains, and lowlands beyond the reach of the regular Army would attack its units wherever possible. [REDACTED]

Conflict in Slovenia and Croatia. Although the national army would enjoy decided military advantages in a conflict limited to Slovenia and Croatia, we believe the two republics have sufficient military and nonmilitary means to resist armed intervention and force a political solution. Both Slovenia and Croatia have rudimentary republic armies, based on their police and Territorial Defense Forces. At a late October 1990 political gathering, a ranking Croat politician said that if the Army moves against Croatia, republic authorities would immediately call upon Croatian troops to desert. We believe intervention in Slovenia would trigger similar calls. In addition, work stoppages, economic sabotage, and interruptions of power and communications would be highly likely. [REDACTED]

Even after its transformation into a rump Serbian army, the regular Army still would be stronger and better equipped than TDF forces functioning as republican armies. Moreover, geography largely favors the regular army in a conflict against republican armies in Slovenia and Croatia. The northern plains--spreading across portions of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, encompassing Belgrade and Zagreb, and reaching almost to Ljubljana--are suitable for mobile warfare and armored operations (see map). The extensive road network would restrict guerrilla operations of the sort for which the TDF is trained, and the Army's air power could be more effectively employed in the open terrain. [REDACTED]

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Military geographic regions and terrain

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The republic forces, on the other hand, would have the advantage of being a dedicated irregular force fighting a defensive battle on home terrain, and we believe republic units would fare reasonably well, especially in areas unsuited to armored operations, such as the western regions of Slovenia and Croatia. The regular Army is clearly more capable militarily, but it would find itself fighting guerrilla bands, an opponent entirely different than the massed armor formations against which it has been trained to mount defensive operations. The Army also is heavily dependent on land lines for command, control, and communication, and these facilities would be especially vulnerable. Moreover, taking and holding entire cities in hostile republics could be accomplished, but only at the risk of heavy losses. Urban areas strongly favor the defense; in built-up areas even armor is vulnerable to guerrilla attack. [REDACTED]

A Wider War. If federal intervention in the republics flares into civil war, the violence will reverberate throughout both Yugoslav society and the military. Organized conflict anywhere and on almost any scale is likely to trigger bloody, widespread communal violence. With tensions running high within and between republics, even a localized conflict between federal forces and the republic armies will take on the character of an ethnic quarrel and could spread rapidly to other areas. [REDACTED]

We believe the Army would lack the capability to assert simultaneous military control across the length and breadth of Yugoslavia. In a full-scale civil war, involving JNA operations against Croatia and Slovenia, intervention in the face of communal violence in Bosnia and Hercegovina, fighting an Albanian uprising in Kosovo, and moving to control Macedonia, the military equation between the national and the republican armies would be more nearly equal. Transportation difficulties, logistical shortfalls, and the presumed impact of desertions and casualties would all tend to limit operational areas. Manpower limitations alone would tend to force the Army to choose its military objectives carefully. Moreover, Yugoslavia is predominantly a country of hills and mountains; unsuitable conditions would restrict mobile armored operations in 80 percent of the country. [REDACTED]

Implications for Europe and the United States

If conditions in Yugoslavia degenerate into civil war, the United States and European nations almost certainly will come under pressure to take sides and provide military and political support to the combatants. Croatian and Slovene authorities would likely repeat their requests for military assistance, portraying their struggle as one of newly democratized, independent states against an aggressive, Communist Serbia. A civil war in Yugoslavia also is likely to reopen similar issues of nationalism and ethnicity in other Balkan states. [REDACTED]

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A Yugoslav civil war, in our view, will quickly become a "European" problem requiring a political settlement--perhaps negotiated under international auspices. A major conflict almost certainly would lead to substantial refugee flows and raise international human rights concerns. Emigre groups might become involved in an attempt to provide cross-border military support for their compatriots, and there is an additional danger of a spillover of violence into neighboring states. [REDACTED]

Any European attempt to impose a political solution could become the first real test of the effectiveness of CSCE institutions. We doubt, however, that CSCE would prove itself up to the task. Conflict resolution mechanisms are voluntary for the parties to a dispute, and moral suasion is the only means of enforcement. Nonetheless, CSCE members undoubtedly would try to use the forum to help Yugoslavia, through arbitration or perhaps a peacekeeping force. [REDACTED]

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